



**International  
Republican Institute**

Suite 700  
1225 Eye St., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20005  
(202) 408-9450  
(202) 408-9462 FAX  
Web site: [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org)

**CEPPS/IRI Quarterly Report: January 1, - March 31, 2005  
TUNISIA  
USAID Cooperative Agreement No. DGC-A-00-01-00004-00  
Project dates: March 1, 2004- September 1, 2005  
Total budget: \$ 370,000 Expenses to date: \$17,890  
Project: 7088**

**I. SUMMARY**

IRI staff met with MEPI regional director Peter Mulrean during the quarter during his visit to Washington DC and agreed that Tunisia programming is best approached through a regional program framework at present. IRI staff plan to visit Tunisia during the coming quarter to present several programmatic ideas to Tunisian government officials. IRI is also planning to have the Institute's senior management visit the country in the near future in an attempt to elicit buy-in from the Government of Tunisia on a more permanent IRI regional presence in the country.

**II. BACKGROUND**

Since its formal independence in 1956 Tunisia has been characterized as a one party state, with the country's founding leader Habib Bourguiba acting both as father of the nation and President for life until his forced removal from office in 1987. The consolidation of power by Bourguiba's Neo-Destour Party in the years immediately following independence and its speedy transition into a national ruling party helped create a unique modern political experience in Tunisia whereby the party, now called the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), held significant levels of popular support in its early years and was able to prove its capacity for effective and efficient civil administration. This phenomenon is linked in part to the enigmatic leadership of Bourguiba himself who made national development and social progressivism central features of state building efforts. The Bourguiba model resulted in a highly professionalized civil service apparatus that can be commended for its administrative skill but lacks political dynamism.

The degree to which modernity and development constitute primary themes of Tunisian nationalism also helped create an environment favorably disposed to market economic reform, modern education and progressive social attitudes toward women. Tunisia, for example, became the first Arab state to formally abolish polygamy in 1956 and women have had the right to vote and hold elected office since independence. Twenty-one women currently hold seats in Tunisia's legislature. By 1965, Tunisia also ranked second among Arab states in the percentage of children attending school, a trend that continues to reflect positively upon Tunisia today by

way of the country's high literacy rates relative to other North African states. The product of this history during the years since independence has resulted in a highly diversified economy, steady economic growth, stable population growth, and an exemplary record regarding women.

Equally significant to the country's modern history, however, is notable absence of progress with respect to democratic political participation. It was not until 1994 that Tunisia held its first multiparty elections for parliament, and competitive elections for president were held for the first time only in 1999. Tunisia has consistently ranked at the bottom of international measures regarding freedom of speech, political rights and press freedoms and according to human rights reports continues to hold prisoners of conscience to this day. While tentative openings can be traced at various points throughout Tunisia's post-independence history, mobilization by potential challengers to the RCD, first by trade and labor organizations during the 1960's and more recently by Islamist elements have curtailed any genuine commitment to democratic reform. Bourguiba's personal style of rule is again attributable to much of this phenomenon as his legacy as "Supreme Combatant" allowed few avenues for accepted dissent.

Tunisia's current President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, who assumed power under the pretext of political reform in 1987, has made a number of tentative reform steps since assuming power, including establishing set terms of office for the president, enacting electoral reforms which ensure 20% representation for the opposition parties in parliament, and allowing the human rights group Amnesty International to establish a regional branch in Tunis. However, Ben Ali's own record has come under fire from human rights groups and dissidents for initiatives such the RCD's altering of the constitution to allow him to run for a fourth term for President and its creation of a second house of parliament with most members appointed by the President.

Despite these mixed signals, symbolic gestures initiated by Ben Ali in the past year along with positive national conditions predisposed to successful democratic transition, including demographic homogeneity, an educated middle class and the lack of an extremist Islamist threat, lend cause for guarded optimism. Given potential openings in Libya in the near future and the reality that Tunisia is one of the few countries of the region where national presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place over the next eighteen month period, IRI believes Tunisia is coming to be of increasing strategic importance to democratization efforts in the region and thus deserving of increased focus under the current proposal.

Accordingly, IRI is proposing to attempt to generate momentum for democratic political reform in Tunisia by holding the Maghreb regional campaign school in Tunis (Objective 1: Goals #1 through #5; And, Cross-cutting issues #1 and #3). Gauging the success of the regional school, IRI also envisions conducting potential follow-on and alumni activities in Tunisia in the run-up to the country's presidential and parliamentary elections and/or envisions providing assistance to newly elected office holders, political activists and civil society through training and civic education after the election (Objective 2: Goal #1, Goal #2, and/or Goal #3; And, Cross-cutting

### **III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES**

IRI staff met with MEPI regional director Peter Mulrean during the quarter during his visit to Washington DC. Strategies for possible program activities in Tunisia were discussed during the

meeting, along with IRI's desire to open an office in Tunis. Taking into consideration the current political environment in the country and the Government of Tunisia's lack of seriousness about any type of meaningful political reform, it was agreed that Tunisia-specific programming conducted in-country would remain difficult for the foreseeable future. IRI experienced firsthand complications with working with Tunisians during the women's regional campaign school conducted by the Institute in July 2004 in Tunis. During the program it was apparent that a number of Tunisian participants who had been registered by the government had been sent to the school specifically to be disruptive. Similar shenanigans can be expected in moving forward with future programs in the country.

In light of this reality, IRI staff decided that Tunisia is best approached through a regional programmatic framework which enables the Institute to access Tunisian civil society and political activities by way of regional seminars, training workshops and similar events. Bringing Tunisian activists to a third country in the region is another idea that will be explored. IRI will additionally explore the possibility of opening a small regional office in Tunisia.

IRI staff will visit Tunisia during the coming quarter to present several programmatic ideas to Tunisian government officials. Future programs will likely require the continued support of the US Embassy in Tunis to ensure necessary sign-offs are obtained from the Government of Tunisia for programs to move forward unfettered. Among the program ideas being explored for the coming quarter are a follow-on program to the Tunis women's regional campaign school that would involve Algerian and Tunisian participants from the school; a regional conference on survey research and polling that would bring civil society activists and survey research experts IRI works with from across the region to discuss polling use and application; and, bringing a group of Tunisian activists tied to independent civil society and the genuine political opposition to a third country in the region for basic training in grassroots organizing and coalition-building.

IRI is also planning to have a member of the Institute's senior management visit the country in the near future in an attempt to elicit buy-in from the Government of Tunisia on a more permanent IRI regional presence in the country.

By way of regional programming, IRI believes rapport can successfully be developed with Tunisian activists and that activities can slowly transition to being Tunisia-specific projects over time.

#### **IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

**Objective One: Numbers and skills of reform minded candidates for elected political office will increase through regional campaign schools**

*No activities to report*

**Objective Two: Multiparty Political Systems will become More Representative and Competitive**

**Result #1: To reform established political parties and to strengthen nascent democratic political parties to make them more democratic, transparent, representative and effective.**

*No activities to report*

Indicator #1: Parties will be exposed to new strategies related to candidate recruitment, the selection of party office holders and internal and external communications.

Indicator #2: Parties will be exposed to new techniques for developing improved organizational structures at the regional and commune levels to increase their national presence

**Result #2: To expand democratic political participation and encourage more competitive multiparty systems.**

*No activities to report*

Indicator # 1: Cooperative efforts between Tunisian civil society associations and NGOs will be used to launch a cross-sector voter/civic education program.

Indicator #2: Increased numbers of women, youth and rural voters will understand the importance of participation at the ballot box

**Result #3: To increase the skills candidates and elected officials in national and local level bodies through training.**

*No activities to report*

Indicator #3: Elected officials will improve skills related to legislative agenda development, legislative policy analysis and constituent services.

Indicator #3: Elected officials will develop improved coalition building and negotiation skills

## **V. EVALUATION**

*No activities to report*

## **VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

Please refer to Activities Section.